

Natural Selections

A NEWSLETTER OF THE ROCKEFELLER UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY

THE QUALITY OF LIFE

EUGENE M. MARTIN

Last December, all postdoctoral associates, postdoctoral fellows, and research associates were asked to complete an anonymous Quality of Life survey about their experiences at The Rockefeller University. The survey included questions about the respondents' satisfaction with benefits, childcare, housing, mentoring, and various other issues. Approximately 200 people completed the survey—the intent of this article is to highlight what seemed to be most important to them.^{1,2}

BENEFITS: A full 80% of the respondents are concerned or very concerned about their retirement savings. One respondent noted that, with many of us in our thirties, the mathematics of compound interest places us in the most important phase of our lives for retirement planning, creation, and contribution. Despite this, 60% of the respondents have no formal retirement plan (such as an IRA or 401k). One means by which employers encourage their employees to participate in retirement planning is by establishing a matching contribution to retirement plans. While the finances of such a plan may be difficult for The Rockefeller University to enact, the survey showed that 72% of the respondents would be likely or very likely to contribute to a formal retirement plan if the university matched their contributions.

Of the respondents who replied that they do not want a matching contribution plan, one noted that it does not benefit many of the foreign students who plan to leave the United States after their postdoctoral appointment. They noted that it is prohibitively difficult to transfer retirement funds to a different country, and, as such, those who wish to leave the United States after their time here would likely receive no benefit from such a plan.

HEALTHCARE: Almost three quarters of the respondents were satisfied or very satisfied with their health insurance plan. The issue that evoked the strongest comments was the forced switch to Oxford Health Plans for postdoctoral fellows. Those comments stressed the difficulty of finding doctors, particularly pediatricians, who would accept the plan. The childcare portion of the survey put an unintentional stress on this latter point; approximately 35% of the respondents have a child or are expecting to have a child within the next nine months; an addi-

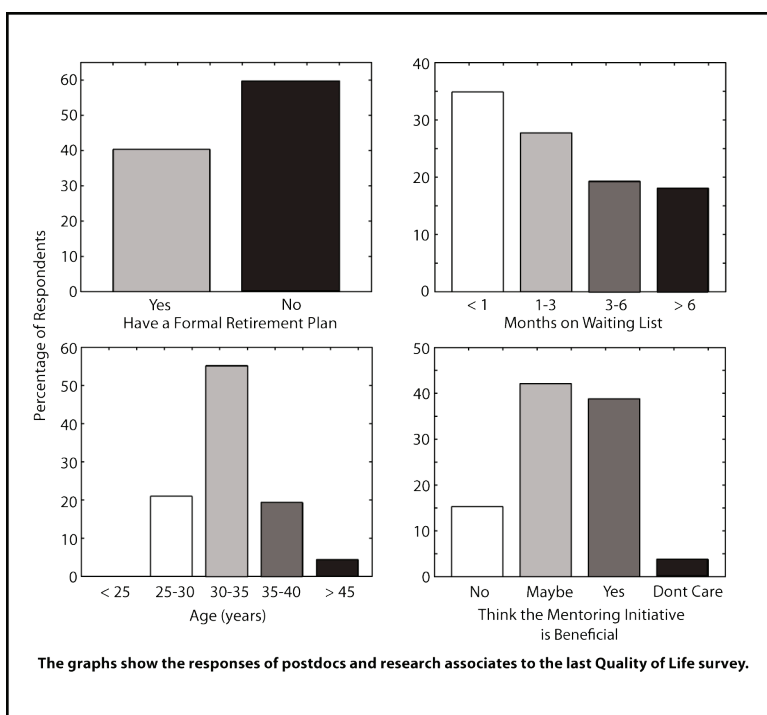
tional 20% of the respondents plan on having a child sometime during their postdoctoral appointment.

CHILDCARE: It is nice to see a happy comment and “I absolutely love the CFC and the teachers” stood out as one. The majority of comments about the Child and Family Center emphasized its importance and the respondents' wishes that it could be expanded (so as to reduce

times on the waiting list). Of the respondents with children, over a third responded that on-site daycare was a very important part of their decision to come to Rockefeller, an additional third replied that it was somewhat important.

A minority of respondents had waited more than a year before being able to enroll their children at the CFC; nineteen percent (9/48) of the respondents with children were on the waiting list for 12 to 18 months and 8% of them were on the waiting list for more than eighteen months. The consequences of not being able to put one's children in the CFC were reported as severe by some of the respondents. The mode cost of childcare outside of RU was reported to be between \$1,500 and \$2,000. One quarter of those agreed with the statement: “My use of non-Rockefeller childcare puts a significant financial hardship on my family.”

HOUSING: Approximately half of the respondents were satisfied or very satisfied with the housing office and with the amenities (such as heating/air-conditioning) in their apartments. The housing portion of the survey received the most comments (perhaps because it was the first section of the survey) and the comments were mixed in tone. Some people complimented the housing office and the maintenance crew, while others commented on the difficulties in communicating with, and getting help from, the housing office. The negative comments expressed a frustration with the general sense that the office staff is not accountable to the tenants. Respondents explicitly complained about not being given a choice between multiple available apartments and the lack of transparency in knowing where they are on the waiting list. While the majority, (61%) of the respondents, were on the waiting list for less than three months, eighteen percent of the respondents were on the waiting list for more than six months.



continued from the cover

Complaints were also focused on the heating and air conditioning equipment, with respondents stating that the equipment is old, nonadjustable, and inefficient. Some respondents complained about not being able to get the equipment replaced by housing, citing energy bills that increased from 80 to 100% from one summer to the next, and others complaining of energy bills that exceeded \$200 or more per month.

To end the discussion of housing on a bright note, over three quarters of the respondents were satisfied or very satisfied with the "response to maintenance requests." As one respondent noted, "The maintenance crew is great."

PDA INITIATIVES: The mentoring initiative³ received mixed reviews. Approximately 10% of the respondents reported not having a good relationship with their PI, and 39% of the respondents reported a communication problem with their PI. Asked whether they thought the mentoring initiative would be beneficial to them, 39% of the respondents answered yes and 42% answered maybe; 57% of the respondents said they would feel comfortable communicating with their PI through the mentorship initiative. Despite this, a third of the respondents' comments were negative, stating that they either thought the plan would not be effective or could be counter-productive.

The majority of the comments based on the postdoctoral retreat and other PDA activities reflected a desire to get more communi-

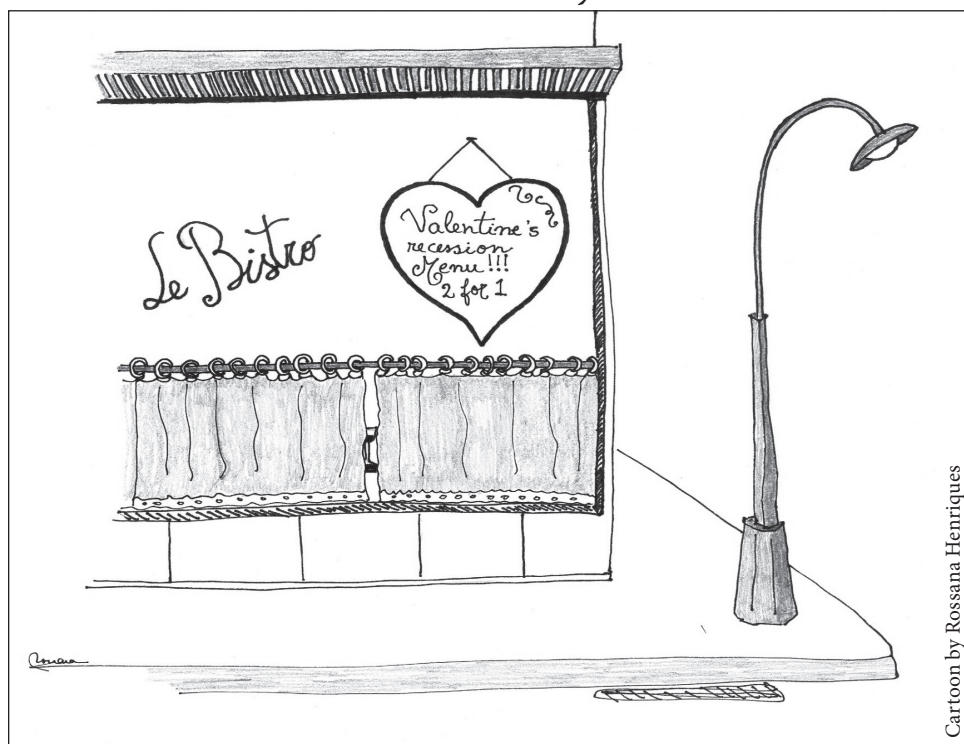
cation amongst postdocs, particularly with regard to each others' science. Likewise, many people responded that their favorite part about the postdoctoral retreat was the lecture series by the postdocs. The PDA is currently working on establishing a weekly lecture series featuring RU postdocs and research associates.

The initiative to bring in a Career Counselor to review people's curricula vitae and to conduct one-on-one mock interviews, as well as the initiative to implement a website, where potential interns could be matched with over-worked postdocs, received positive feedback. The PDA will work on implementing both of these ideas and will try its hardest to address the broader issues brought up in the Quality of Life survey. The PDA thanks all those who responded. ☉

References:

1. Full survey results are available at the *Natural Selections* website or by e-mail request to pda@rockefeller.edu.
2. While the administrative offices related to each issue have not yet been contacted about the results of the survey, the PDA will be having meetings with the respective offices in the coming months and will print a follow-up in these pages.
3. Eugene Martin "An Amateur Guide to Professional Guidance," *Natural Selections*, Issue 254, November 2008, http://selections.rockefeller.edu/cms/images/stories/ns_pdf_archive/ns-10-2008.pdf

Come February...



Cartoon by Rossana Henriques

Natural Selections

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Campus Talk

ADRIA LeBOEUF

It's 7 p.m., it's wet outside, and it's several degrees below freezing, but you still have to get in that one last time-point. You run through the wintery mix to the lab only to find the door locked and you forgot your key. "Why are the doors locked at 7 p.m.?" you desperately ask yourself and the gods of the university. Campus Talk will now answer that question.

When I asked James Rogers of Plant Operations, I found that the doors to the research buildings throughout campus operate on a "dusk to dawn" schedule, approximated by 6 p.m. to 6 a.m. "It's been working this way for more than twenty years," said Mr. Rogers. However, Mr. Rogers did not insist that this rule is set in stone. In fact, he indicated that if a large number of people on campus felt they would be better served with a different schedule of locking and unlocking doors, perhaps something like 8 p.m. to 8 a.m., the rule could change.

If you have an opinion you'd like to share about the opening and closing of campus doors, send us an email at naturalselections@rockefeller.edu. If we get enough responses, perhaps we can institute a schedule for the doors that mixes a little better with the schedules of researchers!

Addendum: *Natural Selections* owes its apology to Zachary Gottlieb for omitting his name as the co-author of the last Campus Talk article in the December-January issue.

Classification of Streptococci: Rebecca Lancefield

ZEENA NACKERDIEN

Headlines from *The New Yorker* to *Science* magazine trumpet new additions to the list of superbugs, including multidrug-resistant strains of streptococci. The search for improved anti-infective therapies would be dead in the water without a fundamental understanding of the biology of these clinically relevant, Gram-positive bacteria. The grouping and typing of streptococci by Staten Island native Rebecca Craighill Lancefield (January 5, 1895 – March 3, 1981), was indispensable in this regard.

A scholarship to Columbia University and subsequent position as a technician in The Rockefeller University (RU) laboratory of Oswald T. Avery and Alphonse R. Dochez formed the cornerstone of a lifelong career devoted to unraveling the biology of streptococci. Using a precipitin method developed by Avery to differentiate among pneumococci, she was able to publish her first paper distinguishing four groups of streptococci.¹ After briefly working at the University of Oregon, she returned to RU to continue her streptococcal research. She systematically grouped these bacteria and designated each group by the letters A through O. She found that group A streptococci were associated with humans and were etiological agents of scarlet fever, sore throat, and other diseases.¹ In an era where capsular polysaccharide antigens were thought to be the major virulence determinants, she identified the M antigens of group A streptococci as proteins with anti-phagocytic properties.² In the 1950s she purified M protein with Gertrude Perlmann and continued to characterize it along with other antigens from group A and group B streptococci. Her work on group B streptococci formed the basis for the medical response to a sudden rise in group B meningitis among neonates in the 1970s.¹

Colleagues acknowledged her success with several awards, including a National Academy of Sciences medal, which was presented to her in 1973 by Maclyn McCarty.³ In addition, she headed the Society of American Bacteriologists in 1943-1944 and served as the first female president of the American Association of Immunologists in 1961-1962. Her other awards include the T. Duckett Jones Memorial Award in 1960, the American Heart Association Award in 1964, and honorary degrees from RU in 1973, and Wellesley College in 1976.³



Image: courtesy of the RU Archives

Vincent Fischetti, RU professor and colleague, remembers her as a dedicated and extremely meticulous and organized scientist, a prerequisite to unraveling the complexity of streptococci. The legacy of her systematic investigation continues to inform the search for vaccines and other antimicrobials against these resurgent human pathogens. ©

References:

1. <http://www.faqs.org/health/bios/25/Rebecca-Craighill-Lancefield.html>.
2. Enersen, O.D. Rebecca Craighill Lancefield: <http://www.whonamedit.com/doctor.cfm/2880.html>, (1994-2008).
3. McCarty, M. Presentation of the Academy medal to Rebecca C. Lancefield, Ph. D. *Bulletin of the New York Academy of Medicine* 49 (11), 949-953 (1973).

Those Wild Things We Love

ENGİN ÖZERTUGRUL

In the words of American naturalist John Muir, animals are our “horizontal brothers”—different, but closely related. From pre-Biblical times to the present, the animal-human bond crosses boundaries of history, geography, and culture. Today, we gaze at this strong bond with awe and mystery. The zoomorphic deities of the Egyptians, like the cow-headed Hathor—the goddess of love; wolf-headed Anubis—the god of alchemy and astronomy; the Chinese dragon; the Mayan jaguar; the Celtic bull; and the Minoan snake are a few of the most popular examples of this immense inheritance.¹

Whether one looks to religious or scientific aspects of creation, animals were present before humans. Animals had inhabited a world without people, but people have never lived without the companionship of animals. Animals are so centrally fixed in our imagination, language, religion, and visual arts, that we cannot project a world without them. Psychologist James Hillman suggests that since animals existed before us they are perhaps our first gods. In fact, Australian Aborigines divide themselves into totemic clans based on their holy ancestors. such as the Great Kangaroo, the Great Lizard, the Emu, the Honey-Ant, and so on.

In modern times, humans and animals share a rather peculiar and unprecedented relationship. The same scientific and technological progress that diminished our instinctual and emotional identification with nature counters our feeling of remoteness towards it. After two world wars, after the Holocaust, and after the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, a sense of relative guilt has come upon us. This loss and guilt have compelled us to a renewed respect for the natural world. We are beginning to reject the unlimited and arrogant sense of human supremacy over animals.

However, today, there are other forces that deprive us of knowing many so-called primitive human cultures of the world. We tend to equate technological advances with the progress of civilizations and rarely look back. This brings a loss of both continuity and alternativeness. Natural history is not exactly one of the hot areas for today's high-paced pop culture and it is certainly not a match to Disney World's remarkable popularity when it comes to how we envision animals today. There may be some level of threat awaiting us in the future if we continue to turn away from our animal kin and look for a more mechanistic view of the cosmos. Removing animals from a natural setting and reducing them to commercial purposes may threaten our own existence by impairing our profound connection with them.

Fortunately, there is a strong counterpoise to this destructive pop culture. In Nadya Aisenberg's book, *We Animals: Poems of Our World*, (1989, San Francisco: Sierra Club Books), we find a collection of contemporary poems of reverence around the globe which have been written to rescue animals from such a denatured world where they are simply made into objects. Contemporary poetry provides us the platform for reaffirming ancient ties. Today's poetry counters our feeling of remoteness from nature to retrieve the spiritual freshness of a wild and pastoral time again. Some of this poetry is based more directly upon observation

rather than on our own projection of animal freedom. Mostly, we find deep reverence for animals and for their unique properties such as beauty, size, endurance, strength, fleetness, and all other superhuman qualities that we most envy.

In W.B.Yeats's poem “The Wild Swans at Coole,” they are the vision of wild; the un-aging swans on the lake at Coole:

*Unwearied still, lover by lover,
They paddle in the cold
Companionable streams or climb the air;
Their hearts have not grown old.*

In general, we envision animals as species rather than individuals; we may adopt a new pet after a lost one and be able to repair the broken chain. It is not that we consciously perceive the individual animal's life to be less important than the continuation of the species. Perhaps we sublimate fear of our own mortality by projecting onto kindred spirits of animal kingdom and their glorious existence before us as described by James Dickey's vision in “The Heaven of Animals:”

*At the cycle's center,
They tremble, they walk
Under the tree,
They fall, they are torn,
They rise, they walk again.*

In Byron's poetry, it is the super-human qualities, onto which his hero, Manfred, gazes with envy and awe at the eagles in the Alps:

*Thou art gone
Where the eye cannot follow thee; but thine
Yet pierces downward, onward or above,
With a pervading vision. Beautiful!*

In Philip Larkin's poem “Livings,” it is neither the size nor the beauty, but the endurance:

*Mussels, limpets,
Husband their tenacity
In the freezing slither-
Creatures, I cherish you!*

In Elizabeth Bishop's “The Moose,” it is the unexpected glimpse of the animal which has come out of the impenetrable woods during a bus excursion that made her raise an almost unanswerable question:

*Taking her time,
she looks the bus over,
grand, otherworldly.
Why, why do we feel
(we all feel) this sweet
sensation of joy?*

Even in our most domestic cozy homes, perhaps it is this puzzling question that crosses our minds each day, when greeted at the door with that unfailing, unconditional wordless passion, before we hear “Hi honey, how was your day?” ☉

References:

1. John Muir, *Stickteen: The Story of a Dog*, (Boston: Riverdale Press, Houghton Mifflin, 1909)



This month, *Natural Selections* features **Sonia Eladad**, Postdoctoral Associate, Laboratory of Human Genetics of Infectious Diseases (Casa-nova Lab). Country of Origin: France

New York State of Mind

How long have you been living in New York? I have been living in NYC for seven years now.

Where do you live? I live in Manhattan, on the Upper East Side.

Which is your favorite neighborhood? I love the Upper West Side. It offers a great diversity of things to do: shopping, movies, concerts and, choice of restaurants. Recently, Magnolia Bakery and Jacques Torres opened. I love Jacques Torres hot chocolate (quite expensive though).

What do you think is the most overrated thing in the city? And underrated? When I first arrived in the city, everything was about Sarah Jessica Parker. Overrated for me. Lincoln Center and all the shows it offers are way underrated.

What do you miss most when you are out of town? The “electricity” of the city.

If you could change one thing about NYC, what would that be? More frequent subways during the weekend.

Describe a perfect weekend in NYC. My perfect day would start by taking a class at Steps on Broadway. It reenergizes me! After, we usually head with some friends for brunch at Prune, eventually do some shopping, relax, and get ready for an evening out.

What is the most memorable experience you have had in the NYC?

September 11, 2001. It was a beautiful day, then the smoke covered the sky for a long time.

If you could live anywhere else, where would that be? London, England. It’s a city full of contrast, history, and modern life. Also, nice museums.

Do you think of yourself as a New Yorker? Why? I do think of myself as a New Yorker. I have been living here long enough to feel at home. ☺



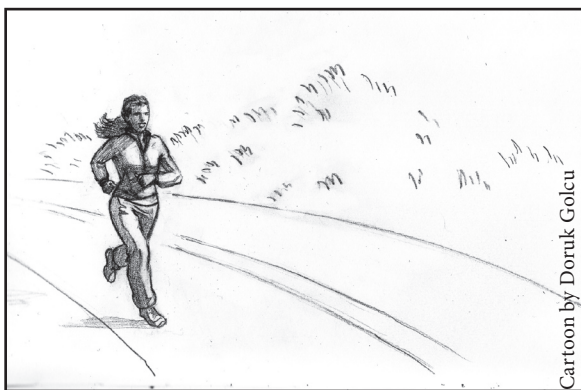
The Long Run: Kelsey Dixon Embarks On a 295 Mile Journey from NYC to DC

CARLY GELFOND

“It’s been done. Eight days ago, I finished running from New York to Washington, DC.” The last words posted on Kelsey Dixon’s blog, *The Long Run*, on October 22, 2008 are a victory dance. But in their bare, quiet simplicity, there is humility. They read like the satisfied sigh one breathes upon coming to the end of a long, wonderful book.

This past October, Dixon, an associate working in The Rockefeller University Development Office, embarked on a noble endeavor that was months in the making. The idea: a 295 mile “Journey Run” from NYC to Washington, DC. The cause: to raise \$10,000 for the nonprofit Central Asia Institute to promote and support community-based education in Pakistan and Afghanistan. The way: \$10,000 divided by 295. That’s \$33.90 per mile, all pledged from family, friends, and supporters who were able to “purchase” these miles. The girl: a twenty

three-year-old Omaha, Nebraska-native with big plans. Since the age of nineteen, Dixon has run seven marathons, a couple of 50Ks and a 50 miler. Not too shabby. While a lot of us struggle to find enough time in the day to do



our laundry and show up for a job, Dixon, a graduate of the University of Southern California with a degree in Neuroscience and in Philosophy, is shattering records in efficient time management. When she

isn’t running or at Rockefeller, she’s working towards earning her M.S. from the New York College of Traditional Chinese Medicine on nights and weekends. She’s on track to graduate this year.

The idea of *The Long Run* came to Dixon after reading the bestselling book, *Three Cups of Tea: One Man’s Mission to Promote Peace, One School at a Time*, by Greg Mortenson and David Oliver Relin. The book recounts

the journey that led Mortenson, Central Asia Institute co-founder, from a failed attempt to climb Pakistan’s K2 mountain to successfully establish dozens of schools, and promote girls’ education in rural Afghanistan and Pakistan. The book hit a note with Dixon, who writes on her blog on July 23, 2008: “At one point, Greg Mortenson is quoted, ‘I don’t really care about fighting terror. The biggest issues we need to address today are poverty, illiteracy and ignorance, which breed hatred.’ I think this is really important, and it’s a large part of what attracts me to Greg and his project.”

So now where does *The Long Run* come in? Dixon admits that the idea of running from NYC to DC grabbed her before the idea of raising money for CAI did. Yet as she thought about taking eight days off from work, convincing her dad to take eight days off from work, and generally investing a lot of time and energy into the endeavor, she realized that she needed it to be about something more to make it worthwhile. This is where CAI entered the picture. There was “something about the power of one determined person keepin’ on keepin’ on,” she says, “and putting his whole heart into something and making something good happen.” In a separate pre-run post, she

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goes on: "Another thing I like about the way Greg Mortenson operates is that his primary interests lie in getting things done rather than talking about them, so, that in mind, I'm shifting gears. To the run." This is Dixon in a nutshell.

Over the course of eight days (which followed months of training), with her dad riding along in his car as "crew" and guide, Dixon completed what she set out to do, covering about 38 miles each day. Her blog (thelong-run2008.blogspot.com), which documents the months of training and planning leading up to the run, a few brief thoughts and reports during the run itself, and reflections after all was said and done, is a peephole into Dixon's psyche. Much of what she has to say echoes the spirit of Greg Mortenson in *Three Cups of Tea*, though she doesn't always make this connection outright. As she reflects in her final post: "I think there is a tendency within this society to believe in one or the other of ...two personalities—either the happy-go-lucky, can-do...dreamer or the down to business...pragmatist. The thing is; I am convinced we need them both. Had I not been an overly optimistic dreamer, I would not have begun this journey. Had I not been a strong and determined problem solver, or had I not been able to call upon the strength of people I love, I would not have finished it." These are the words of someone who knows how to get things done.

The blog is revealing in other ways as well. Dixon's upbeat spirit permeates her commentary. "There were parts that hurt a lot, and parts where I wanted to quit," she writes. "But there were also parts where I felt that I must

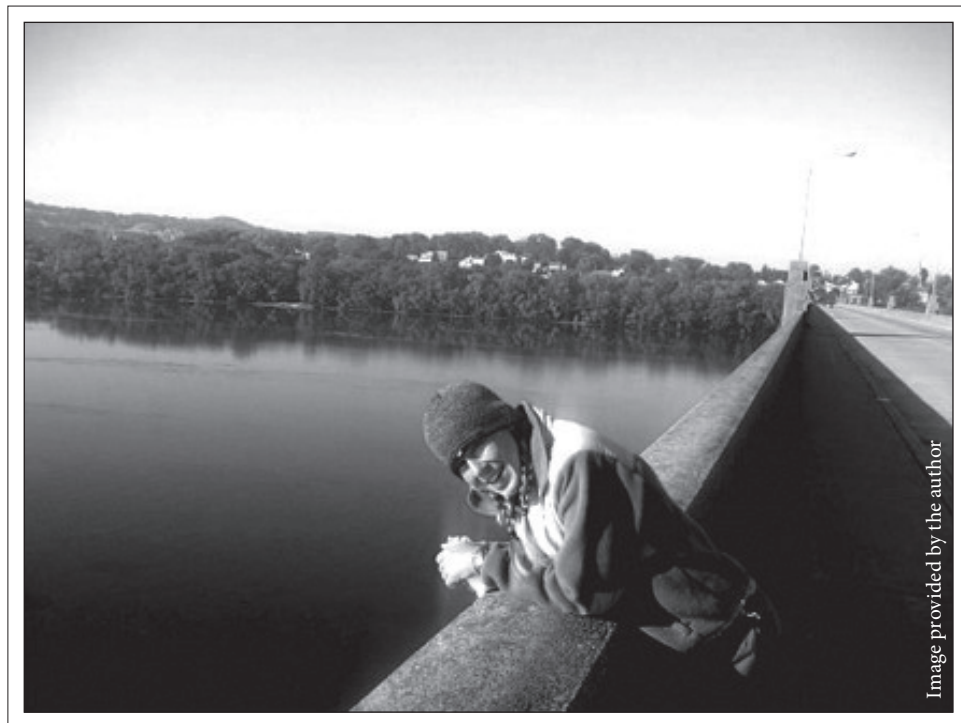


Image provided by the author

The Long Run

be the luckiest person in the world, to be outside, crossing the beautiful country on a most beautiful day, on a most beautiful journey." To be sure, here is a motivational thought to get you through a physically grueling task. But it works for any task really—the idea of looking for what's positive—maybe even beautiful and inspiring—in so many of the things we do. The idea of thinking about why we're lucky.

Her sense of humor is apparent, too. She writes: "By the fourth day, my RIGHT quadricer had really started to make it clear that it was not happy about this effort, and in turn, it had acquired a theme song. Every time I heard

Daft Punk's "HarderBetterFasterStronger," I had this image of my quadricer muscle coming to life as a little cartoon and singing to me. I realize now that sounds really, really strange, almost so strange that I feel like I shouldn't tell you about it." (Maybe you shouldn't have, but I, for one, am glad you did.)

In the end, Dixon raised between \$9017.40 for CAI "Because that's the only way I know to get things done—to do them. To ask yourself constantly if you are doing all that you can do." These are not simply Dixon's words; they are Dixon—herself, clear-headed and mindful, laid out on paper. ©

Flicker of Hope Shines despite Cloudy Forecast for Science Research

ZACHARY GOTTLIEB

While the dust of the recent economic crash settles across most of the nation, a gray cloud appears to hang over science research and technology. From the looks of it, this cloud will linger on for the foreseeable future.

For most sectors of the economy, the effects of the recession have already taken hold—investments and homes have been lost and jobs have been cut. For scientific research, however, the effects have not yet taken shape. Current projects are still working with grant money that was awarded in the past few years, meaning that most scientists and their projects are protected for the time being. Sadly, these funds will eventually run out, and when that time comes new grants will have to be obtained. The success of grant applications in the coming years will thus be the true measure of how badly science research will be hit by the financial crisis.

The extent to which these new applications will be successful is difficult to predict. "We are sort of dealing with a mixed bag here," says Dr.

Michael Young, Vice President of Academic Affairs at The Rockefeller University. "We just spent eight years with an administration that was not very kind to science, and tax revenues will probably fall in the immediate future. But the new administration has indicated a much more central role for science in its policies for the future."

With his promise to "restore science to its rightful place" in his inaugural address, President Obama pronounced his determination to change the political attitude towards science in the U.S. And while political rhetoric usually must be taken with caution, Obama's actions thus far have backed this claim. His first move was to restore the position of science advisor to a more powerful ranking in the White House than it had under former President George W. Bush. This position has officially been titled "Assistant to the President for Science and Technology," and will be held by Dr. John Holdren, a Harvard professor and physicist who has done extensive work on climate and energy research and policy. Also holding high positions on the president's science team are two Nobel

Prize-winners—Dr. Harold Varmus, who will co-chair the President's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology, and Dr. Stephen Chu, who will hold the position of Secretary of Energy.

In addition to appointing individuals who are well received by the science community, Obama's recently-announced economic recovery plan includes a budget for science that is expected to total around \$10 billion. Included in the package is \$3 billion for the National Science Foundation, including \$2 billion for expanding employment opportunities in fundamental science and engineering; \$2 billion for the National Institutes of Health Biomedical Research; and \$1.5 billion for NIH to renovate university research facilities and help compete for biomedical research grants.

Of course, it is important that scientists remain realistic in their hopes of increased funding and improved facilities. Despite the big buzz surrounding Obama's focus on science, nothing yet has been actually accomplished. The new economic recovery package will not take effect for at least another year, probably longer. And while federal funding for scientific research remains stagnant, funding from companies, foundations, and private endowments is starting a slow but steady downfall.

For proof, look no further than New York City's own Starr Foundation, the source for a large portion of the area's education, healthcare, and social services, including a three-year, \$50 million offering for a stem cell research involving Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, Weill Cornell Medical College, and The Rockefeller University. Starr had most of its money invested in American International Group, but after AIG's recent collapse, the Starr Foundation has been pulled down

with it. Since December 2006, when they last released a financial report, Starr has lost nearly one-third of the assets it had claimed in December 2006, forcing them to put all new proposals on hold.

While it is hard to predict which universities and hospitals will take the biggest hit in research funding, there is reason to remain optimistic here at The Rockefeller University. "When markets do what they've done, universities everywhere are affected," Dr. Michael Young points out. "[But at Rockefeller,] on the one hand, we have greater protection than many institutions because a good deal of research support for our labs comes from our endowment. On the other, a drop in the endowment removes part of this cushion, so investigators need to be more active than ever in pursuing federal funding."

Even on the broader scope of scientific research, there is reason to maintain a positive outlook on the future of science. Throughout history, science and technology have proven to be essential parts of any economic growth. They surround us every day, from our computers and cell phones, to the energy that we use, to the food that we eat. Research enterprises create more jobs, and from those jobs come new products and more energy-efficient and cost-effective ways to do things. Simply put, our nation needs science to help fix the current problem. Obama's administration appears to be well aware of this fact and is preparing to make science and technology major tools in revamping our nation's shattered economy.

So, while a cloud hangs over the future of science research funding, one thing appears certain—when the dust settles, science will once again find itself as a centerpiece of our nation's economy. ©

Life on a Roll



Whisper by Daniel Andor

In Our Good Books

CARLY GELFOND

Listening Is an Act of Love: A Celebration of American Life from the StoryCorps Project

Edited and with an Introduction by Dave Isay

The Penguin Press, 2007

“In this booth the non-celebrated will speak of their lives.”

—Studs Terkel at the launch of StoryCorps, 2003

StoryCorps began with the idea that everyone has an important story to tell, and that these stories should be collected and preserved for future generations. In 2003, the first StoryBooth appeared on the scene in New York City’s Grand Central Terminal. To participate was simple: you made an appointment to visit the recording booth. You came alone or brought someone—anyone. Your grandmother, your best friend, your daughter, the man with the produce cart on the corner who sells you your bananas everyday. You were greeted by a trained facilitator—someone who would make sure everything went smoothly. And you sat down at a table in front of microphones. In the stillness of the soundproof booth, you began your interview. You answered questions asked by your companion or by the facilitator. What was your earliest memory? What was the happiest moment of your life? The saddest? You began to tell your story. At the end of forty minutes, two CDs had been created—one for you and one that would become part of an archive at the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress. Excerpts of various interviews would be broadcast each Friday on NPR’s *Morning Edition*. Your story was now a documented part of history.

The StoryBooth in Grand Central Station closed in May 2008, but another in Lower Manhattan remains open at a new location in Foley Square. To further the geographic reach of the organization’s efforts, a Mobile Tour began in May 2005, when the first two MobileBooths—Airstream trailers refitted with soundproof recording studios—departed from the Library of Congress in Washington, DC and embarked on cross-country story-collecting journeys.

StoryCorps, an independent nonprofit project, is the brainchild of legendary radio producer Dave Isay. In *Listening Is an Act of Love*, Isay has compiled a sampling of excerpts transcribed from some of the most moving, intimate, often confessional stories recorded over the years, and divided them thematically into sections, including “Home and Family,” “Work and Dedication,” “Journeys,” and “History and Struggle.” In the last section, entitled “Fire and Water,” stories are collected from two of the most significant and tragic moments in twenty-first century American history: September 11, 2001 and Hurricane Katrina in August 2005.

The format works well. As each recorded story provides listeners with a kind of oral “peephole” into an American life, each printed excerpt gives readers a glimpse of sorts into that life as well. In print, we have lost the sound of voice but gained more time with the casual poetry of the words themselves and the language in which they are strung together—off-the-cuff drop-lets of spontaneous wisdom. In reading these passages at our

leisure, words become animated by a voice in our head, imagined, but drawn from real life. From the grandmothers and shopkeepers and sons and bus drivers we have known, seen, or heard, and from clues about dialect that we find in the text. At the end of most excerpts is a photo of the interviewee and, if one was present, the interviewer. I loved the anticipation of finally arriving at a visual of the real, live character that I had already imbued with life and voice. I knew his story, and here he was.

Stories that some will find fascinating in their foreignness—Blanca Alvarez (55 years old) tells her daughter, Connie, about crossing illegally into the U.S. from Mexico—others will read with a feeling of familiarity. And surely this is part of the idea of the book: that our identities are built from our experiences and how closely those experiences resemble or differ from those of others gives us perspective on our lives.

The dual purposes that StoryCorps aims to serve—listening and telling—become clear as they are played out in the excerpts as well. Sometimes, telling brings catharsis. Other times, it is evident that the trauma lingers. Joseph L. Robertson (87 years old) tells of being in the U.S. armed forces that landed on the beach soon after D-Day. He recalls a young German soldier from the Hitler Youth—“blond, blue eyes, fair-skinned, so handsome”—coming out of the woods. Robertson, in self-defense, is forced to shoot him, and the image continues to haunt him: “...The second night I woke up crying, because that kid was there. And to this day I wake up many nights crying over this kid. I still see him in my dreams. And I don’t know how to get him off my mind” (p. 180).

There are many other moments in the book that illuminate facets of human experience. And yet just as interesting is the way the stories show how we remember and scrutinize these experiences. Mary Caplan (60 years old) remembers the night her brother, Tom, died of AIDS: “Grief is when you get up the next day and you see the sun, and you say, ‘Will I ever think the sun is beautiful again?’” (p. 199). The startling sensation that Caplan felt at the beginning of this grieving period is remembered with great clarity when she speaks of it now. Caplan’s words perfectly and eloquently capture the essence of this universal experience.

Isay says in his Introduction that “StoryCorps is a project about permanence in an ever more disposable society.” Listening to (or reading about) the experiences of others allows us to indirectly bear witness, and in-so-doing, we begin to take part in the building of a collective cultural memory.

Obama may have said it best: “For we know that our patchwork heritage is a strength, not a weakness.”

Note: Part of the beauty of StoryCorps is that anyone can participate. You can. I can. And this past summer, I did. It’s a fantastic experience that I encourage everyone to try. Go to StoryCorps.net to find out more. ☉

